Union Gospel Tabernacle (Ryman Auditorium,
Grand Ole Opry House)
116 Fifth Avenue, North
Nashville
Davidson County
Tennessee

HABS No. TN-23

PHOTOGRAPHS

HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Architectural and Engineering Record
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C. 20240

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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY HABS No. TN-23

UNION GOSPEL TABERNACLE
(Ryman Auditorium, Grand Ole Opry House)

Location: 116 Fifth Avenue North, Nashville, Davidson County, Tennessee.
USGS Nashville West Quadrangle
UTM Coordinates: 16.519930.4001650.

Present Owner: NLT Corporation (September 1979).

Present Occupant: Vacant.

Present Use: The National Life and Accident Company offers tours of the building.

Significance: The Ryman Auditorium was built at a time when religious revivalism was attracting such a following in Nashville that Thomas Green Ryman, a recent convert himself, decided in 1888 to provide the city with a large assembly hall. Known as the Union Gospel Tabernacle until 1904, when it was renamed in honor of the late Thomas Ryman, this was for many years the largest auditorium in the South. It soon was being used less for religious meetings and more for conventions, lectures, concerts, and stage shows. The Ryman Auditorium became known to a wider audience when radio station WSM began broadcasting the weekly Grand Ole Opry from there in 1941. Country music listeners throughout the middle of the nation heard the Saturday night Opry live from the Ryman Auditorium, and thousands came from near and far to visit the Ryman for a performance. The last Grand Ole Opry show at the Ryman Auditorium was on March 15, 1974.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: Construction was started in 1889 and finished in 1892. The balcony was added in 1897, the stage in 1901.

2. Architect: Hugh C. Thompson.

3. Original and subsequent owners: The site was sold by Mr. & Mrs. W. B. Russell of Hickman County Tennessee to the Trustees of the Union Gospel Tabernacle in 1889, for $10,000.

In about 1920, the property was sold to the Auditorium Improvement Company, an organization that became known as the Ryman Auditorium Corporation in 1944. The building was purchased for $207,500 in 1963 by the National Life and Accident Company, and has since been transferred to the parent corporation, the NLT Corporation.

4. Builder, contractor, suppliers: The truss roof was erected by the Louisville Bridge and Iron Company.

5. Original construction: The Ryman Auditorium was originally built to provide a place for the revivalist Rev. Sam Jones to preach in. Dedicated as the Union Gospel Tabernacle in 1892, the auditorium had seating for about 3,000 in benches arranged in concentric south-facing rows for three quarters of a circle around the pulpit. The auditorium space filled most of the rectangular building, except for the four corner stairways and shallow entrance vestibules.

6. Alterations and additions: In 1897 a balcony was built, doubling the seating capacity of the hall. The occasion for this expansion was the Tennessee Centennial, which was expected to attract a number of conventions to Nashville. The gallery was completed in May 1897 in time for the gathering of the Confederate Veterans Association the following month. The Association contributed the money to pay for the gallery, which has been known as the Confederate Gallery ever since. (For a plan of the auditorium ca. 1900 see Beasley, "The End of a Rainbow," p. 20).

In 1901, the Nashville Philharmonic Society, assisted by a fund-raising committee, built the stage in preparation for the visit of the Metropolitan Opera. The stage eliminated almost half of the seating, leaving semicircular rows of benches holding about 3,500. In 1904 and 1906, the stage facilities were improved, to include dressing rooms and property storage.

Further improvements in the backstage area were made between 1941 and 1974, when the Ryman Auditorium hosted the Grand Ole Opry. The front of the building was sandblasted in 1957, and the original wood doors were replaced by aluminum and glass doors. The crockets on the parapets and stepped gables were removed, and the large Gothic window in the front gable end was paneled over. Stained glass was placed in the front lancet windows in 1966.

B. Historical Events and Persons Connected with the Structure: Thomas Green Ryman owned and operated a line of steamboats on the Cumberland River, in addition to wharf property and a large saloon in Nashville. After his conversion in 1885, under the influence of the preaching of the revivalist Rev. Sam Jones, Ryman dedicated himself to building a non-denominational auditorium for religious purposes. The Union Gospel Tabernacle was incorporated in 1889 under Tennessee charter. Ryman carried much of the $100,000 debt for the construction of the auditorium, and Jones appeared in Nashville several times to preach and help raise money to pay off the debt. When Ryman died in 1904, 4,000 people came to the Union Gospel Tabernacle for the memorial service conducted by Sam Jones. On that occasion, Jones proposed that the building be renamed the Ryman Auditorium. A memorial service for Jones himself was held in 1906.

For half a century, the Ryman Auditorium served as a place not only for religious meetings, but also for conventions, lectures, and political rallies. Operas, symphonies, concert bands, solo singers and instrumentalists performed there, as well. From 1920 until 1941, the Ryman was the only legitimate stage in Nashville.

Such events continued to be held at the Ryman Auditorium, even after radio station WSM began to hold the Saturday night Grand Ole Opry there in 1941. With the construction of Opryland 6 miles northeast of Nashville, the downtown auditorium ceased to be the place where the weekly broadcasts originated. On March 15, 1974, the Grand Ole Opry gave its last performance in the Ryman Auditorium.

(For further details concerning the persons and events associated with the structure until 1920, see Henderson, "Nashville's Ryman Auditorium." For the Grand Ole Opry years, see the Supplemental Material included in these data pages, below. For a general survey of persons and events, see Beasley, "The End of the Rainbow.")

C. Sources of Information:

1. Old views:

A view from the northwest (ca. 1907) was published in Historic Preservation 24 (January-March 1972): 19.

2. Bibliography:

a. Primary and unpublished sources:

Christian, Ralph J., Patricia Hall, and James B. Gardener, "National Historic Landmark Nomination Form for Ryman Auditorium," October 1978.

b. Secondary and published sources:

Beasley, Ellen, "The End of the Rainbow," Historic Preservation 24 (January-March 1972): 19-23.

Brumbaugh, Thomas B., Martha I Strayhorn, and Gary G. Gore, eds., Architecture of Middle Tennessee: The Historic American Buildings Survey (Nashville: Vanderbuilt University Press, 1974).

Grand Ole Opry History-Picture Book (Nashville: WSM Broadcasting Company, 1957).

Henderson, Jerry, "Nashville's Ryman Auditorium," Tennessee Historical Quarterly 27 (Winter 1968): 305-28. Included in Robert M. McBride, ed., More Landmarks of Tennessee History (Nashville: Tennessee Historical Society, 1969), 283-308.

History of the Grand Ole Opry (Nashville: WSM Broadcasting Company, n.d.).

Jones, Laura McElwain, The Life and Sayings of Sam P. Jones, (Atlanta, 1907).

Malone, Bill C., Country Music, U.S.A. (Austin: University of Texas Press, for the American Folklore Society, 1968).

Stamper, Powell, The National Life Story: A History of the National Life and Accident Insurance Company (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1968).

Tassin, Myron and Jerry Henderson, Fifty Years at the Grand Ole Opry (Gretna, La: Pelican Publishing Company, 1975).

Wolfe, Charles K., The Grand Ole Opry: The Early Years, 1925-35 (London: Old Time Music, 1975).

D. Supplemental Material:

History of the Grand Ole Opry at the Ryman Auditorium (excerpt from Ralph J. Christian et al., "National Historic Landmark Nomination Form for Ryman Auditorium," October 1978).

Music industry historian Malone traces the origins of country music "virtually to the beginning of American civilization."[1] In the farmhouses, local dances, traveling shows, and churches that have thrived in the rural South since the first settlers arrived, a uniquely American music and performance style

evolved, reflecting a mixture of British ballads, Calvinist doctrine, Negro music styles, and ethnic influences. But Malone notes that "despite the richness of its vocal, instrumental, and stylistic repertory, and despite the antiquity and diversity of its heritage, southern country music remained unnoticed by the outside world until the 1920s."[2]

By the early 1920s commercial record companies had recorded the Carter Family, Jimmie Rodgers, and other country music performers, but the 78 phonograph record did not prove as effective as the radio in commercializing and broadening the audience for what was then known as "hillbilly" music. The radio first appeared on the market in the early 1920s and quickly became a phenomenally popular diversion for millions of Americans. Beginning with the first radio barn-dance program in 1923, the radio also proved, according to Malone, "the most significant means of country-music dissemination" and the leading factor in the "refinement, modification, and eventual standardization" of this then-regional music.[3]

The first country music-oriented program to gain national recognition was the National Barn Dance broadcast by WLS radio in Chicago beginning in 1924, but a similar broadcast by WSM radio in Nashville, Tennessee, in 1925 proved of more lasting significance. Owned by the National Life and Accident Insurance Company, the 1,000-watt WSM station hired George D. Hay, the announcer for the WLS program, as its first station director in 1925. On November 28 he introduced the first WSM Barn Dance show, an hour of fiddle music played by an 80-year old performer named Uncle Jimmie Thompson. The show quickly became a popular regular weekly feature. The name was changed in 1926, when Hay, nicknamed "the Solemn Old Judge," contrasted his program with the preceding program of classical music. "For the past hour we have been listening to music taken largely from the Grand Opera," Hay declared, "but from now on we will present the Grand Ole Opry."[4] The new name caught on quickly, and the roster of regular performers soon expanded to include the Gully Jumpers, George Wilkerson and his Fruit Jar Drinkers, Arthur Smith and his Dixie Liners, and Uncle Dave Macon, "the Dixie Dewdrop." It was Southern rural music, performed primarily by Southern rural musicians, that came over the air waves during the Opry's alloted hour. According to an Opry history, "The casual 60-minute event, impromptu, unrehearsed and with a minimum of planned production, marked the real beginning, however humble, of country music as an important segment of radio programming."[5] The history of country music since then, says Malone, "has become one of steady evolution toward (the) commercialism and professionalism" characteristic of the industry today.[6]

The commercial success and enormous popularity of the Opry led WSM to increase its broadcasting power to 5,000-watts in 1927, and the station was assigned a national clear channel status in 1928. Recognizing the popularity of the program, National Life began to promote its ties to the Opry in order to boost the market for its

insurance. The company even published a popular illustrated pamphlet entitled Fiddles and Life Insurance and had salesmen give away tickets to watch the broadcast. The latter proved so popular that studio accommodations soon had to be expanded to take care of the swelling number of fans. Three successively larger studios in the National Life building, the Hillsboro Theater, the Dixie Tabernacle, and the War Memorial Auditorium all housed the opry broadcasts at one time or another. By 1941 it had become imperative that the Opry find a permanent home. The weekly crowds had grown to number well over 3,000 in the 16 years of broadcasting. WSM finally selected as the Opry's permanent home the Ryman Auditorium.

Built in the 1890s as a gospel tabernacle, it was an accessible and centrally located facility with a distinguished reputation as an entertainment center. Once moved in, Opry performers and audience alike found the Ryman's circular seating and the close proximity of the audience to the stage well-suited to the close-knit, family atmosphere of the Grand Ole Opry. The over-all religious atmosphere of the building also added to the almost devotional feeling surrounding the Opry. The excellent acoustics and space for equipment also proved definite advantages. But most importantly, the Grand Ole Opry finally had a permanent home of its own.

The Grand Ole Opry leased the Gothic Revival Ryman Auditorium for 22 years, and then in 1963 National Life bought the building. During the years it was located in the Ryman, the Opry both reflected and influenced the development of country music. Individual singing stars, such as Red Foley, Roy Acuff, and Cowboy Copas, emerged as featured performers with back-up bands, and country music comedy became an important part of the Opry with such well-known comedians as Cousin Minnie Pearl and Rod Brasfield. During World War II, country music and the Opry became one of the strongest and most popular links that overseas servicemen had with home. During the 1950s, as the recording industry began to grow, country music's incorporation of popular and rock 'n' roll styles became evident in performances by such Opry stars as Hank Williams, Marty Robbins, Faron Young, and Patsy Cline. The Opry continued to grow in the 1960s, assuming national and international significance. According to Tassin and Henderson, "By 1950, the name 'Grand Ole Opry' meant country music to the world....All other barn dance programs had become insignificant compared to this one; they served merely as stepping stones on the glory road to the Opry...the Grand Ole Opry was the center of country music...the ultimate, the top of the mountain, the end of the rainbow for which every country music performer searched."[7] The Country Music Association and its Country Music Hall of Fame lent further support to the Opry's ongoing growth and international recognition.

The Grand Ole Opry continued with weekend performances in the Ryman Auditorium through the early 1970s. "Although the Ryman had been home for thirty years," note Tassin and Henderson, "the Opry had long outgrown it and needed a place that would comfortably accommodate its nearly one million annual visitors."[8] In 1971 construction began on a $15 million Grand Ole Opry House, located at the National Life-owned theme park, Opryland, U.S.A. So much an essential part of Opry production and atmosphere was the Ryman Auditorium that it served as inspiration for much of the construction of the new Opry House. Exact measurements were taken of the Ryman and were reproduced exactly or proportionately in the new structure. The circular seating, overhanging balcony, and rows of pews were reproduced in modern form for the new auditorium, giving the new Opry House much the same feel and acoustic quality as the old. As a final touch, a disk of flooring six feet in diameter was removed from the floor of the old Ryman stage and inset into the new stage, according to Tassin and Henderson making the new Opry home "just an extension of the old one."[9] Since the Grand Ole Opry's permanent relocation to the new Opry House in 1974, the Ryman Auditorium has been used for a few special country music productions, but it is now basically maintained only as a tourist attraction. Admissions paid by visitors allow the Ryman to be kept open and operating year-round.

Although the structure predates the founding of the Opry and had a significant role in area history otherwise, it is the Grand Ole Opry that gives the Ryman its national identity. The Opry, according to Stamper, is to country music "what Hollywood is to moving pictures and Broadway is to the theater."[10] As the longest running radio program in history, the Opry has disseminated country music to the Nation and the world and become the catalyst in the development of the country music records and entertainment industry, while still preserving the traditions of Southern rural folk music. No other structure is more closely identified with the Grand Ole Opry or country music than the Ryman Auditorium which, according to Green, is the widely recognized "mother church of country music."[11]

Prepared by: J. A. Chewning
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Historic American Buildings Survey
September 1979

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[1]Malone, Country Music, U.S.A., 359. (See Bibliography, above).
[2]Ibid., 29.
[3]Ibid., 25.

[4]Quoted in Charles K. Wolfe, The Grand Ole Opry: The Early Years, 1925-35 (London, 1975), 22.
[5]Grand Ole Opry History-Picture Book (Nashville, 1957), 2.
[6]Malone, Country Music, U.S.A., 361.
[7]Tassin and Henderson, Fifty Years, 78.
[8]Ibid., 79.
[9]Ibid., 90.
[10]Stamper, National Life Story, 127.
[11]Green, Country Roots, 6.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: The Ryman Auditorium is a rectangular, two-and-a-half story brick structure with Gothic Revival exterior detailing.

2. Condition of fabric: Good.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Overall dimensions: 120' (twelve-bay front) by 175'.

2. Foundations: Rock-faced limestone coursed ashlar on west (front) elevation and first three bays of south elevation; rock-faced limestone coursed rubble on remainder of south elevation. Smooth-dressed limestone water table.

3. Wall construction, finish and color: Dark red brick, laid in stretcher bond. Molded brick archivolts in blind arcades on front facade. Limestone and pressed metal stringcourses, drip moldings, sills, hoodmolds, and offsets on the corner pier buttresses.

4. Structural system, framing: Masonry bearing walls. Balcony supported by iron posts.

5. Porches, stoops, balconies: Two sets of fire steps lead from the sidewalk on the Fifth Street front to the main lobby. Limestone steps, situated within the two arched entryways lead from the alley along the south of the building to the backstage area. A similar arrangement occurs at the rear of the building.

6. Chimneys: A brick chimney with corbeled top rises above both the northeast and southeast corner piers at the rear of the building.

7. Openings:

   a. Doorways and doors: There are four aluminum doors beneath each of the two blunt-pointed entry arches on the west (front) facade. Originally there was a double wood door under each arch. Double five-or six-panel doors are located at various entrances and exits: two pairs on the south (side) elevation, six pairs on the east (rear) elevation, and two pairs on the north (side) elevation.

   b. Windows: Most of the windows have pointed arches and one-over-one-light sash (upper section now fixed in place). The Decorated Gothic windows in the gable end arch on the front facade have been paneled over.

8. Roof:

   a. Shape, covering: A gable roof covers the main auditorium space. A narrow hip roof covers the rear two-story vestibule and stairhall space. All roof surfaces have asphalt shingles.

   b. Cornice, eaves: The parapets are now capped with pressed metal. Originally there were small crockets along most of the parapets, including the stepped gable of the front facade.

9. Other features:

   A limestone aedicular panel in the Decorated Gothic style, bearing the inscription "Union Gospel Tabernacle," is centered at the second-story level of the front facade.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plans:

   a. First floor: The stage is located along the south side of the 120' by 140' auditorium. Concentric rows of benches extend all the way to the north wall. Across the west (front) and east (rear) of the building is a narrow lobby, with stairs rising both to the north and south.

   b. Second floor: A semicircular balcony curves around the auditorium, beginning above the tenth row of benches on the main floor. There is a hall across the west and east ends of the building.

2. Stairways: Open well, two-run stairs are located at each of the four corners of the building. These stairs are iron, made by the National Foundry & Machine Company, Louisville, Kentucky.

3. Flooring: Pine floorboards are used throughout the auditorium.

4. Wall and ceiling finish: Walls are plaster. The main auditorium ceiling consists of boards running east-west. The underside of the balcony consists of novelty siding, laid across the sectors between the radiating beams.

5. Openings:

   a. Doorways and doors: Paired double doors are located under the two arches between each lobby space and the auditorium, on both floors, at both the front and rear of the building.

6. Mechanical equipment: Standard for a public auditorium and stage and equipped for radio and television broadcasting.

7. Notable original furniture: All the benches have pine seats and backs; the ends have incised pointed arches and applied roundels.

D. Site:

The Ryman Auditorium is located on the east side of Fifth Avenue North (originally Summer Street) a half block north of Broadway (originally Broad Street) in downtown Nashville. Fifth Avenue slopes to the south, so that the water table on the south side of the building is 8 feet above grade. There is a parking lot at the rear of the building.

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September 1979

PART II. PROJECT INFORMATION

The historical and descriptive data were prepared by J. A. Chewning of the HABS staff, in the summer of 1979. The photographs were taken by Jack E. Boucher of the HABS staff in August 1970.

ADDENDUM TO
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(Grand Ole Opry House)
116 Fifth Avenue, N.
Nashville
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